

Men Accused Of Sexual Harassment Serve Limited Shame Time?

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#MeToo Finds Validation Each Time A Woman Gathers Courage To Call Out Sexual Abuse, Like Sakina Bootwala Did Against Spoken Word Poet Shamir Reuben Last Week



Illustrations/Uday Mohite

This writer tried to reach Khodu Irani this week. Our calls and WhatsApp messages, to the Pune-based restaurateur and owner of Koregaon Park's High Spirits pub, have gone unanswered. Irani will not comment on an incident from October 2017 when his reputation was shorn publicly after he was called out for misogyny and bullying by a Twitter user. Right after, an ex-employee blogged about being groped and body shamed. There weren't two, but several. Scores of Facebook posts by women came right after, calling out the blatant harassment, one of them alleging a beer was emptied on her head for complaining to his wife.



A gig at Khodu Irani's High Spirits

His mother, corporator Moti Irani, who had claimed she would "be the first to punish him" if the allegations were true, sent us a curt "not interested" when we asked to speak to her about how things had unfolded since. A scan of the High Spirits FB page revealed that the musician community, many of its members having sworn never to play there, had gone back to performing at weekly gigs.



A still from one of TVF's biggest hits, Permanent Roommates

"Nothing has changed. Perhaps the numbers aren't as high as they used to be, but people are still coming in, for gigs and flea markets. The place is being managed by a bunch of women now, and everything is under control," said a regular customer, who participated in a recent flea. "He comes in every day, takes key decisions, but is keeping a low profile. He has enough support to see him though. It's a small city, and everyone knows what happened, but that hasn't spoiled things for him," said another long-time Pune resident.

May we assume then, that Mumbai spoken word poet, Kommune's Shamir Reuben, who was accused last week of sexual harassment, will be back on his feet too? The fellow poets and event organisers we spoke to said they wanted to have nothing to do with him. In short, his career was close to over. But, is it? Those tracking developments around media entrepreneur Arunabh Kumar, will say, no. The founder and CEO of The Viral Fever (TVF), and online entertainment source, faced multiple sexual harassment accusations in March 2017, after a female blogger alleged "abuse and molestation" over two years. The chargesheet filed by the MIDC police in the case mentioned a video production executive hired to shoot a promotional feature with Kumar, saying he had touched her tattoo, called it sexy, and had told her, "you are so hot ya!" Kumar was arrested in April and released on bail. In June that year, he announced on Twitter that he was stepping down as CEO but had "faith and confidence that eventually truth will prevail".

When this writer reached out to Kumar, he ignored her WhatsApp messages, and finally blocked her number. Most others, including actors who had worked in hit TVF shows, said, "we have nothing to say". The apprehension among former colleagues, harassment survivors and industry insiders was clear. Then a production hand at TVF, who agreed to speak to us anonymously, said,

"Inside the doors of TVF, his sexual harassment case is a forgotten story. Arunabh is active at work. We meet him a good three to four times a week. He participates in concept development and approvals. There is no denying that he is extremely sharp. Whenever we are done with the final drafts of scripts, he takes a narration and suggests tweaks. It's a pleasure to work with him. From what I know, female employees are comfortable around him."

A female staffer calls him "courteous and fun", although the ghost of the case follows him. "I had heard all those stories, but I haven't faced a problem myself. I am new to the system, though. The biggest challenge right now, I sense, is to revive the reputation of TVF. He is on top of scripts and stories, commissioning new concepts and finetuning sequels of popular shows. A lot of old hands have refused to work with him given the controversy, so he has the uphill task of reviving the brand. They have investors to answer to, after all." With Reuben, the social media trial may have graver consequences because his career hinged on it. "The ramifications have been disastrous. Social media acceptance had made him who he was. He isn't the one to work backstage, he needs the attention!" says a close friend.

Reuben hit the news for not-so-nice reasons when 19-year-old poet, [Sakina Bootwala, accused him of sexting her](#). This was followed rapidly by other young women who said "me too". Reuben on his part offered a weak apology, again on social media, claiming he didn't think it was inappropriate to talk friends in that manner. A poet friend, who has snapped ties with him since says, "He had the chance to present his side, but he didn't. It is his influence among the youth on social media, after all, that he leveraged to exercise control and do all this [inappropriate conversations]."

Bootwala, who we inquired with about making an official complaint, said she no longer wished to comment on the matter. Lifestyle blogger Sheena Dabholkar, who had first called out Irani's behaviour, says she is not surprised that Bootwala chose not to approach the police. "It's a lonely journey. I too had approached a lot of survivors but none of them wanted to [file a complaint]. I think telling the story was justice enough. None of us wanted to spend time in the justice system — it's a lot of work, and it's expensive (see box)."

That Irani and Reuben have been lucky that none of the survivors chose to approach the police means they can get on with their lives. Has corporate India failed to take a tough stand against those accused of sexual abuse?

Meghna Pant, Mumbai-based writer and advocate of gender rights, says when a sexual harassment incident becomes public, it is important for the accused and his organisation to cooperate with investigative agencies. "We also need checks and balances. Every organisation should comply with the Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace (POSH) policy and HR should run a background check on candidates. Our lawmakers also need to set an example by

holding the accused accountable, like they did with Tarun Tejpal by formally accusing him of rape. If they do the crime, they must do the time."

Vikram Shroff, employment law partner at Nishith Desai and Associates, makes the classic legal claim when he says, you are innocent until proven guilty. "If the complaint has not been proven and the accused/defendant is cleared, legally [and ethically], he has the right to return to his position and must be treated fairly. This is however, easier said than done," he says.



Meghna Pant, author and gender rights advocate

'#Metoo is pointless. It's like making hot tea and forgetting to drink it'

As a community, we tend to offer impunity to men who err. We lack the moral courage to take a stand against powerful men, rich men, good-looking men. Instead, we condone them. Why are we then surprised when men like Mahesh Murthy brazenly deny any wrongdoing despite complaints from several women? He calls his arrest a "procedural technical arrest"? What about Phaneesh Murthy, who is now a non-executive director at Cigniti? What about Arunabh Kumar who is expected to reprise his role of Yogi in Pitchers 2, since TVF expects the matter to cool down by then? Women too, speak up too little or too late. They are reluctant to file police complaints because they don't want to waste years making the rounds of police stations and courts. They, understandably, want to forget the unsavory incident and move on with their lives. #metoo makes no sense beyond a point. It's like making hot tea and forgetting to drink it. Women must walk the talk if they expect men to do the same.



Sheena Dabholkar, lifestyle blogger who first called out Irani for sexual harassment, in multiple tweets dated October 11, 2017

'Social media serves as some sort of justice system'

I heard somewhere, that Khodu has got himself a lawyer who represents a top celebrity. So you can imagine how tough this is for the women. Social media offers both sides a the chance to respond. It also works to shake up the perpetrators. Nothing much has changed, though [since the women came out against Irani]. Khodu's wife runs the place now. One of my friends has recently played as a sessions musician there, and to him, it made no difference what had happened, although at the time of the controversy, he had supported the women survivors. They [the Iranis and the establishment] never even acknowledged what happened. Everyone thinks time will heal, but it doesn't.